

5 Things You Should Never Say to an Anxious Child



I wanted to sleep with a bat under my pillow. It was plastic; nonetheless, it was a weapon. I was 5 years old, and I firmly believed that each night when I went to sleep, a robber would break into the house. I needed something to defend myself (and maybe my family), and my brother's yellow Wiffle ball bat seemed ideal. Unfortunately, my parents never complied with my request.

They didn't understand why I was so worried. After all, there was no logical evidence to support my anxiety: our neighborhood was safe, we had never experienced a break-in, and we had a security alarm to alert us of any danger. But who said anxiety was logical? It's generally not. Actually, let's back up. Who said what I was experiencing was "anxiety"?

Anxiety is a word that I use now, based on personal and professional hindsight. Back then, as far as my parents and I were concerned, I was simply prone to a bit of extra worry. None of us understood that my fearful thoughts were actually provoking a real nervous system response.

So how did my loving parents deal with my countless "what if" questions? "What if we get robbed?" "What if we forget to turn the alarm on?" "What if we leave the door unlocked?" "What if the robber finds my room?" How did they handle it when I knocked on their door at two o'clock in the morning, asking to go downstairs to check the lock once more for good measure?

My parents' first line of defense was always reassurance. The next strategy involved invoking my logic. When all else failed, which it often did, they (understandably) became frustrated and sometimes expressed it.

Please know that my parents are amazing. They always supported me, but they didn't really understand what I was going through at the time. It took me a couple of decades to figure it out and to find ways to help alleviate my worries.

To help other families going through something similar, I want to point out five phrases that were said to me out of great love yet were unable to help me when I was in the throes of anxiety. Knowing what I know now, I'll also tell you what I wish I could've expressed to my parents. Finally, I'll present some alternative ways to help a child experiencing anxiety. Here's that list:

1. Mommy said, "It's going to be OK. Trust me."

I wish I could have said, "Mommy, I know you're trying to make me feel better, but my mind is telling me the opposite: 'It's NOT going to be OK.' And my body seems to be responding to my mind. My heart is racing, my palms are sweating, and my tummy feels funny. It's hard for your loving words to overpower what's happening inside of me."

Here's what we know: The [stress response](#) is hardwired into our nervous system as a protective mechanism devised to enact the fight-or-flight reaction to threats. Anxiety mimics this response. As such, when your child is knee-deep in anxiety, a rapid stream of chemicals is dumped into the body for survival. This makes it difficult to think clearly and, subsequently, for words of reassurance to sink in.

Try this: Respond to your child's nervous system first. Help them calm down with deep breathing. This can take the mind and body from fight-or-flight to rest-and-digest mode.

2. Daddy said, "There's nothing to be scared of."

I wish I could have said, "Daddy, remember the first time you asked mommy out on a date? Remember your first day at a new job? Or remember the time when you got in that bike accident? Maybe your parents knew everything was going to be OK, too, but you didn't know that. You experienced real fear. My fear is real, too."

Here's what we know: [Research](#) shows anxiety initiates a fear alarm inside your child's mind and body. It's a false alarm, but nevertheless, it feels very real. That alarm is for protection; your child feels "stress" or "fear" in order to survive. To make sure one is really paying attention, the mind might even exaggerate the object of the worry (e.g., mistaking a stick for a snake).

Try this: Validate your child's emotions. You can say, *"I see that you're scared. I've been scared before, too, and I know what that feels like."*

3. Mommy said, "Let me tell you all the reasons you don't have to worry."

I wish I could have said, "Mommy, I know that what you're saying makes sense. It's just that it's hard to think clearly and logically in this moment. I have a lot of feelings right now and I'm just focusing on those. It's just really hard to think clearly."

Here's what we know: [Studies](#) show one by-product of the anxiety response is that the prefrontal cortex -- the more logical part of the brain -- gets put on hold while the more automated emotional brain takes over. After all, cave people didn't have a lot of time to use logic when it came to running away or fighting a predator.

Try this: Soothe the nervous system with a visualization exercise. Ask your child to envision a still, quiet place. Ask them to breathe in and out in a way that's comfortable and to describe this place to you. Once your child is calm, discuss the idea that feelings are not necessarily facts. Feelings can be challenged by saying, "Hey, I don't think you're really true!" Self-disputation is a great way to quell worry.

4. Daddy shouted, "STOP BEING SUCH A WORRIER!"

I wish I could have said, "Daddy, I know that you're frustrated and even angry. This makes me feel so bad because I want to stop being a worrier; I really do. I want it to stop, but I just don't know how. I wish I knew how."

Here's what we know: Kids who worry know that they worry more than others because they are labeled as "worriers" from a young age. They also compare themselves to others who have less anxious reactions to the same fears. In fact, many kids develop anxiety about having anxiety. Add on a dose of guilt from parents, and kids can feel completely miserable. Remember, kids often feel as helpless as adults do when it comes to chronic worry.

Try this: To the best of your ability, do not label your child. Instead, when they're in a relaxed state, explain the evolutionary basis of worry. Seriously? Yes! Kids love to know that worry has a purpose and that everyone worries to some extent. You can use [this infographic](#) to guide your explanation.

5. Mommy and daddy said, "We don't understand why you're so worried."

I wish I could have said, "I know you don't understand, but I need you to try. I need you to try to understand what I'm going through. Put your hand on my racing heart, listen to my shallow breath, look at me... this is real. I want you to understand. I need you to understand. Please tell me you get it. Please."

Here's what we know: When a child is anxious, they feel scared and helpless. If you also feel helpless as a parent, empathy can help guide your actions. By stepping into your child's shoes and understanding their feelings and perspectives, your reaction to their needs will be more authentic and in line with their needs.

Try this: When your child feels anxious, try to recall a time when you felt true fear. Then connect with your child using these three words: "I get it." Let your child know that you see that they are going through something challenging. Let your child know that you really see them.

On a final note, I wanted to say something to my parents and to all parents on behalf of anxious children: *"We, too, get it. We understand what you sacrifice for us. We know that our pain and struggle become your own. We know that even on the days you feel completely helpless, you still try to support us -- and you do. By never losing faith and never giving up, you are our models of grit and perseverance. Thank you."*

If you're looking for unique ways to help your anxious child, check out our animated anxiety relief program at www.gozen.com.